

**COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING, FEBRUARY 23, 2009
LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY: CONCERNING THE COMMISSION ON CHILD
PROTECTION**

Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the proposed budget of the Connecticut Commission on Child Protection, (CCPA).

My name is Valeria Caldwell-Gaines and I am a private attorney who currently holds a contract with Commission on Child Protection. Under that contract, I provide legal services to an average of 75-100 indigent parents and/or children a year. Four years prior to the establishment of the Commission, I provided these same services pursuant to an annual written agreement with the Judicial Branch.

I have long held an interest in working with families and children. I have during my professional career served as Deputy Director for the community-based programs for the Connecticut Junior Republic, Deputy Director for Spike Johnson House, and Clinical Social Worker for Gray Lodge Shelter for Girls. I digressed for a brief period and prior to entering private practice, served as Deputy Director for the State Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities. But I am back doing the work that I truly enjoy doing.

I am here today to testify in strong support of the continued funding for the Commission on Child Protection at a level that will enable it to continue to "raise the bar" for existing contract attorneys and, to attract more experienced private attorneys to the field. During my seven years of practice in this area, if there is one thing that I am struck and motivated by the most, it is the parent who can't afford a private attorney and is of the genuine belief that I, as his/her "court appointed" attorney will not fight as hard for her.

While most of us have always worked hard to dissuade that belief, having a well funded independent agency that can assist us in obtaining some of the resources and tools we need to be evenly matched with the state has been of great value. Just the mere existence of the agency is a plus in that it has brought about uniformity, mandated a standard of practice which, if followed, will quickly dispel any notion, by clients, adversaries and judges alike that contract attorneys are not adequately prepared the task at hand.

The Commission on Child Protection has also leveled the playing field for contract attorneys by facilitating and encouraging the use of experts, subpoenas as needed, independent evaluations, extensive and varied training. Prior to the establishment of the CCPA, training opportunities were limited and quite frankly unaffordable at the rates we were being paid.

Lastly, a real plus for many of us dedicated to working in the area is work by the Chief Child Protection Attorney to ensure that child welfare practice will be recognized as a legal specialty in our state. Through her efforts, the National Association of Counsel for Children certification program is now in Connecticut. Indeed, one month from this Saturday, a significant number of contract attorneys, me included, will be sitting for a national exam in hopes of obtaining board certification, hence becoming specialist in "the

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Practice of law representing children, parents or the government in all child protection proceedings including emergency, temporary, custody, adjudication, disposition, foster care, permanency planning, termination, guardianship and adoption..." Connecticut should be proud to have an agency committed to fostering this level of practice to such an important area.

I thank the Committee for recognizing through its appropriations that providing indigent parents and children with the highest level of representation possible is one of the most important things you can do to protect children and preserve family integrity.

Respectfully submitted,

Valeria Caldwell-Gaines